

Erie County budget plan hold line of taxes, boosts funds for cultural

By Harold McNeil | News Staff Reporter
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Erie County lawmakers heard a lot Monday evening during their public hearing on County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz's budget proposal for 2014, including appeals to support Poloncarz's plan to hire a new energy officer to reduce the county's costs for electricity and other energy use.

In addition, the Legislature heard appeals to consider property taxes as a more predictable revenue source to bridge future budget gaps. Lawmakers also were serenaded with a bit of classical music as a way to thank lawmakers for their past support of cultural agencies in the community.

"We're here to play and say thank you to the legislators for their continued support," said Kate Holzemer, a violinist with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra,

She and fellow musician Loren Silvertrust performed briefly before the start of the Legislature's public hearing on the county executive's \$1.39 billion budget proposal, at which nearly two dozen representatives of local cultural organizations, civic groups and members of the general public spoke during the 1 1/2 hour forum.

Poloncarz's spending plan, which would maintain the current property tax rate of \$5.03 for each \$1,000 of assessment, would also increase spending on cultural agencies by 1.5 percent.

"I think things have changed a little bit over the years," said Randall Kramer, artistic and executive director of Musicalfare Theatre.

Kramer was referring to previous battles with the Legislature over arts and cultural funding after they were cut under the administration of former County Executive Chris Collins.

"At one point up here, I sort of felt like I was a kid asking to borrow the car keys for the first time. Now it feels like we're working together in a family business, trying to make something great in this community. I guess the point is that the relationship has matured," Kramer said.

His sentiments were shared by other arts groups representative who expressed their hope that lawmakers would continue their support. Several of those who addressed the Legislature appealed for lawmakers' support of the addition of a new energy officer in Poloncarz's budget proposal.

As chief sustainability officer for the University at Buffalo, Ryan McPherson said he knows the value of a good energy officer. Having one in place at UB has helped the university save about \$300,000 in energy costs.

“So what does this term, sustainability mean? I’ll tell you what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean tofu, tree-hugging and inner peace,” McPherson said.

“It means we think not only about today, but about tomorrow and what type of university we want the next generation to have,” he added.

Meanwhile, Marian Deutschmann of the League of Women Voters, offered criticisms of the budget for relying too heavily on the sales tax as a major source of revenue, and for using surplus funds to help bridge a \$29.2 million budget gap.

“We urge you to look at the property tax as a more predictable revenue source to bridge the budget gap now and in the future,” she added.

Poloncarz attended the hearing, but did not address lawmakers. He said he was there to listen. The Legislature is scheduled to adopt a budget next week.

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<http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/erie-county/erie-county-budget-plan-hold-line-of-taxes-boosts-funds-for-cultural-20131125?sp-tk=18EC8415EC8CEFD01672AF03A9EDC2AEC70A0C032B885DBBC28E4CCC8A8BD65708C5697A3783DAB717DEB558E0142736726F091453C705473AAA8AE9145653C79C16A3F5D33D775002E4D2AE61D2C2D97CE503074A9281E3DE02E45AD02846CDD90E7726450E122535450461515CAF3715B6E98A111C81715295E6301DA27893989F374719E1EFD0D4C87D364047688351607B2634392743DAA89F52058C0FE0E0F2111>